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ABSTRACT

After increasing for a decade, circulation of books at Brooklyn College reached a peak and then declined. A staff member sought circulation data from libraries whose parent institutions were members of the Association of Urban Libraries. These showed a similar phenomenon and a wider sample was sought, including public and private four-year colleges and universities. From data obtained from the 104 institutions surveyed, it was found that enrollment in the period studied increased by 29.7 percent, but books borrowed per reader declined by about 13 percent. Borrowing of reserve books declined even more. Borrowing trends were computed by dividing the total circulation per year by the number of full-time equivalent students. Student unrest, involvement, McLuhanism, the use of paperbacks and copying machines, larger classes, and fewer term papers, were suggested as causes. The surveyor suggested another factor: the law of diminishing returns. While enrollments increased very markedly, library space, collections, and staff did not increase in proportion. Recommendations for further study include the collection of data from a larger sample covering a longer period of time to reveal newer trends, to increase librarians' knowledge about one aspect of academic library output, and to disclose other independent variables which may have a functional relationship to the borrowing of books. (Author/JPF)

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BOOK BORROWING IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES, 1964/65 - 1968/69; THE TREND WAS DOWN.

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LIBRARY DEPARTMENT
BROOKLYN COLLEGE
Brooklyn, New York
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SUMMARY

After increasing for a decade, circulation of books at a large and growing city college reached a peak and then declined. A staff member sought circulation data from libraries whose parent institutions were members of the Association of Urban Universities. These showed a similar phenomenon and a wider sample was sought, including public and private four-year colleges and universities.

It was found that enrollment in the period studied (1964/65-1968/69) increased by about 30%, but books borrowed per reader declined by about 13%. Borrowing of reserve books declined even more.

Student unrest, involvement, McLuhamism, the use of paper-backs and copying machines, larger classes and fewer term papers, were suggested as causes. The surveyor suggests another factor: the law of diminishing returns. While enrollments increased very markedly, library space, collections and staff did not increase in proportion. Recommendations for further study are made.

(n=104 institutions whose total enrollment represented about 17% of all full-time equivalent enrollment in four-year colleges and universities in the U. S.)

BOOK BORROWING IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES, 1964/65-1968/69; THE TREND WAS DOWN.

In 1970 the Chief Librarian of Brooklyn College asked a staff member to examine the circulation statistics for recent years and to suggest reasons for a decrease noted in recorded borrowing. The decline had set in after a peak reached in the academic year 1965-1966.

Some preliminary examination of the data was made, accompanied by speculation about functional relationships between the borrowing of books from academic libraries and other aspects of campus life. When a casual remark to a colleague on a nearby university campus elicited the comment that she had observed a similar phenomenon on her campus, it was decided to broaden the scope of the inquiry. This paper reports the results.

Located in an urban environment, Brooklyn College is a unit of The City University of New York. Established in 1930, it is a member of the Association of Urban Universities. In 1937 it moved to its present campus. Its curricula are chiefly in liberal arts and sciences and in teacher education. The master's degree is granted in twenty fields.

Circulation records include the number of volumes borrowed and taken from the building by students for a two-week loan period (one week during the summer), or by faculty members for longer periods. The borrowing record for reserve books, those used within the building or borrowed for home use, is added to this in order to obtain an annual total. Circulating books are on open shelves; no count is made of in-house reading or of the use of reference books or of bound or current periodicals.

The year after the college moved to its present campus, full-time day session enrollment was 6,518. Ten years later, 1948, it was 7,854. The figure for 1958-59 was 8,005. For 1968-69 it was 10,460. The part-time enrollment of students in the School of General Studies and in the Graduate School when added to the day session increased the total full-time equivalent enrollment to about 50% above the day session figures. Full-time equivalent enrollment for 1968-69 was 16,329.

A policy of open enrollment adopted in the fall of 1970 approximately doubled the size of the freshman class. More than 31,000 students are now enrolled in the college. The day session enrollment is 16,458 and the full-time equivalent total enrollment is 21,209.

In 1939 the Library collections totalled 63,000 volumes; ten years later its holdings were 192,000. In 1959 the figure was 306,954 and in 1969 the Annual Report of the Chief Librarian showed a collection of 490,742 volumes.

The library building occupied until 1959 was similar to many planned and constructed before World War II in that the circulating books and the bound periodicals were housed in a closed stack, to which only faculty members, graduate students and library staff members had access.

In the spring of 1955 the stack was opened, and students were permitted to page their own books. Circulation for the following year increased by 30% and records indicate that it continued to grow substantially each year through the academic year 1962-63. After that year the rate of growth fell sharply. As noted above, a peak was reached in 1965-66. In the following three years the total number of books borrowed declined at an average rate of about 7% per year.

During the five-year interval under special scrutiny in this report, 1964/65 - 1968/69, college and university enrollments increased substantially. More significant, therefore, for our purposes than the total number of volumes borrowed per year is the number borrowed per reader. Dividing the total circulation per year by the number of students in full-time equivalent will give us an index number that will be useful in studying trends.

At the outset a simple questionnaire was mailed to librarians of the 95 other institutions which were members of the Association of Urban Universities. A cover letter explained the problem as it had been observed at Brooklyn College and invited respondents to suggest explanations for whatever changes in recorded circulation were observable on their campuses.

Fifty-one usable replies were received from member institutions in 22 States, including, in addition to universities, seven colleges and five institutes of technology. Data from some other libraries could not be used or was unavailable because of major changes in circulation record keeping practices during the period under study. A total of 454,194 f.t.e. students were enrolled in these 51 institutions in 1964/65. By 1968/69 the number had grown to 573,363. The smallest of these institutions had an enrollment, in 1964/65 (in full-time equivalent) of 1,775 students; the largest reported for 1968/69 was a f.t.e. enrollment of 31,850. The average enrollment for the 51 institutions in the earlier academic year was 8,905 per institution. Four years later it was 11,242. The four-year increase in enrollment was 26.2% for the 51 institutions.

In 1964/65 a total of 8,240,150 volumes were borrowed; four years later the figure was 9,132,275 a gain of 9.7%. The increase in enrollment was notibly greater than the increase in borrowing.

Dividing the number of students into the number of volumes borrowed we find that in 1964/65 readers borrowed an average of 18.1 volumes each. Four years later they borrowed 15.9 each, an over-all decrease of 12.5%.

Of course variations from the general trend were noted in reports from a number of campuses. Average number of books borrowed per reader increased slightly in eight institutions and substantially in five. On seven of the campuses where an increase in average book borrowing per reader was noted, the library occupied a new building during the five-year period under study. On one of these campuses the readers borrowed an average of 16 volumes each in 1964/65 and four years later borrowed 27, an increase of 40.7%.

The largest decrease noted on any campus was from an average of 18 books per student to 6. In this state university enrollment grew by 333%, from less than 2,000 students to almost 8,000 during the interval under study in this report.

Another interesting phenomenon was disclosed by studying statistics from the 38 institutions which provided figures about the borrowing of reserve books. Borrowing of reserve books decreased more markedly than did total borrowing. Otherwise expressed, at the end of the period reserve books constituted a smaller percentage of all borrowing transactions than at the beginning. In a period when total number of books borrowed per reader dropped by 12%, per reader reserve book borrowing dropped by 52%, from an average of 7.3 volumes per reader to 3.5 In the 38 institutions which provided reserve book statistics 29% of all books borrowed in 1954/65 were reserve books. Four years later the percentage was 23%.

It next occurred to this investigator to seek a less homogeneous sample in order to compare results with those provided by a study of data received from the 51 institutions which were members of The Association of Urban Universities.

One hundred inquiries brought usable responses from the 54 institutions located in 32 states and Puerto Rico. Thirty-one were universities, twenty of them public and eleven independent. Twenty-three were colleges; of these ten were public and thirteen independent. The smallest of these institutions reported its enrollment for 1964-65 as 550. The largest, in 1968/69, had 26,086 in full-time equivalent.

The average enrollment for the first year studied was 7,085; four years later it was 9,192, a gain of 35.2%. Total number of books borrowed increased by but 14.7%. During the first year average number of books borrowed per student was 33 books; in the fifth year it was 28, a decline of 15%.

For eleven of these institutions a per-reader increase in borrowing can be reported. Six of these opened new library buildings. The largest gain was in a relatively small state college which entered a new building in May of 1968. Here the increase was from 25.5 books per reader to 36.2, an increase of 42.8%. The greatest drop among the 54 institutions was in a state college whose enrollment doubled in four years. Average reader borrowing declined from 10.8 volumes to 3.4, a drop of 68.5%.

In our heterogeneous group, while average number of books per reader declined by 15%, borrowing of reserve books for the 44 institutions which provided data, dropped by one third, from an average of 9 reserve books per reader to six. Reserve books constituted 34.7% of the total number of books borrowed in 1964/65.

Four years later reserve book borrowing as a percentage of total borrowing had dropped to 23.6% in 44 reporting institutions.

By merging data for the two groups which together totalled 104 institutions, we find that in the four-year period enrollment grew by 29.7%; the mean average enrollment grew from 7,085 to 9,192 students. There was a significantly less than corresponding growth in the number of books circulated: 12.9%.

In 1964/65 readers in the 104 institutions borrowed, on an average, 23.97 volumes each. Four years later they borrowed 20.86 each. This is a decline in total per-reader borrowing in the four year period of 12.97%. Reserve book borrowing, for the 82 institutions which provided data, declined by 41.8%.

It may be worth noting that the twelve institutions which did not enter new buildings but which witnessed an <u>increase</u> in per reader borrowing reported a much smaller rate of growth in the size of the student body, 5.2%, as compared to 29.7%, the average for the entire group. Average enrollment of the twelve colleges grew from 5,169 to 5,544. Average enrollment for these institutions was somewhat smaller than average enrollment for the entire sample.

Nine institutions, all but one members of the Association of Urban Universities, circulated fewer than ten books per reader in all of the years studied. Three were independently operated institutes of technology, three were public universities, three were under denominational sponsorship. Ten libraries circulated more than an average of 50 volumes per reader in both years. Only one of these, an independent university, was a member of the Association of Urban Universities. Only one was a public institution. In all of them a decline in average number of books borrowed per reader was observed in the four year period.

At the same time that quantitative data were sought from librarians of other institutions, we suggested to them several factors which might have accounted for local trends: increased student interest in "relevance" and in involvement in community activities, discontinuance of the practice of assigning a term paper to freshman classes in English composition, larger classes and consequently fewer assignments which resulted in written reports, and, with regard to reserve books, the increase of availability and use of paper-backs. Respondents were invited to offer corroborative or additional explanations.

In addition to general concurrence in the factors named above, respondents suggested most often that campus unrest was a pervasive influence. Uncertainties about the draft and the war in Vietnam were mentioned. Exceptional circumstances, unique to individual campuses were cited: the institution of a pass/no credit system of grading, opening of a Ratskeller and other new buildings, longer hours of library opening with less need to take books home, a devastating tornado in June 1966, internal renovation of the building, with consequent disruption of service, a new first-year program requiring little use of the library. Also, there was "McLuhanism": "I have been wondering if the current generation, having been exposed to ideas in ways other than print all their lives aren't continuing to rely on movies, T.V., records, etc., far more than most academic libraries are prepared to realize." One colleague asserted that students were reading as much as they ever did, but using many more paper-backs and current journals.

"Relevance", on more than one campus caused a shift in the kind of materials used, viz,: "...during the past three years we have noticed a substantial increase in the use of periodicals...for information about drugs, narcotics, community activity."

The decline in the use of reserve books, in addition to the prevalence of paper-backs, was attributed by several respondents to the availability and rapidly increasing use of copying machines, and to a shift in teaching methods, with emphasis on exploratory rather than assigned reading.

In the fall of 1964 a total of 4,239,395 students were enrolled in the four-year colleges and the universities of the United States. In the fall of 1968 there were 5,638,122 an increase of 33%.[1]

During the period under study most academic libraries were falling behind in their capacity to cope effectively with bulging enrollments. There were more readers to occupy seats, keener competition for the most useful books, and more students per librarian. It may very well be that professional staffs were not "...sufficient in number to organize and administer the resources of the library at an effective teaching or research level, as opposed to the stripped-down administrative or housekeeping label at which libraries are usually forced to operate."[2]

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[1] Digest of Educational Statistics, 1970. U.S. Office of Education, 1970. p.67, Table 87, and p.75, Table 98.

[2] Wilson, Louis Round, and Maurice F. Tauber, The University Library, 2d ed. New York, Columbia University Press, 1956, p.20.

This study reports data provided by 104 colleges and universities, enrolling about 17% of all students enrolled in such institutions in the United States in 1964-1968. While enrollments in our sample grew by 29.7%, per-reader borrowing declined by 12.9%. The decrease in reserve-book borrowing was even greater.

A number of explanations are offered: factors in the contemporary environment, the inability of libraries to grow at the same rate as the enrollment, student alienation and unrest. All these are conjectural, expert opinion perhaps, but not conclusive.

In due course data from a larger sample covering a longer period might be examined by other investigators to reveal newer trends, to increase our knowledge about one aspect of academic library output, and perhaps to disclose other independent variables which may have a functional relationship to the borrowing of books.